

Sexual Desire, Responsibility and the Fallen Man:
Rachel Crothers' *Ourselves* and *When Ladies Meet*

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Rachel Crothers, during the course of her playwriting career (1906-1937), wrote over 30 plays exploring and validating the lives of women in early twentieth century American society. In particular, she often focused upon gendered double standards with respect to sexuality. Her early plays, most notably *A Man's World* (1910) and *Ourselves* (1913), strike a forthright, easily quantifiable feminist, activist tone in this regard. As the decades go by, however, the feminist tone of Crothers' work becomes increasingly more complex and arguably ambiguous as evidenced by plays such as *As Husbands Go* (1931), *When Ladies Meet* (1933) and *Susan and God* (1937).¹ In an effort to further investigate the complex arc of Crothers' feminist voice over the course of her lengthy career, this essay will examine two of her plays which, though written 20 years apart, evidence a remarkably similar and provocative thematic premise and dramaturgical strategy: *Ourselves* (1913) and *When Ladies Meet* (1933). The narrative of both plays concerns a female character who is sexually desiring in an unmarried state and, in both plays, the object of the female character's sexual desires is a married man who willingly obliges her desires. Also present in both plays is a willingly-cheated-upon wife. With these similar plot elements, both plays explore the boundaries of responsibility for the sexually desiring, ultimately suggesting that women have the power to regulate not only their own sexual desires but also the sexual desires of men. The key to claiming this power, Crothers suggests, is enacted female solidarity. In both *Ourselves* and *When Ladies Meet* women join forces to confront society's sexual double standard, symbolized by the archetypal 'fallen woman', by forcing men to experience her fall from grace, a grace that is female, not society determined.

The first decade of Crothers' career is noted for her dramas, which evidence a strong element of social conscience.² Thematically, these early social dramas are outward looking as they clearly articulate a connection between the experiences of her female protagonists and their greater social context. There is a deliberate sense in these plays that what is at stake for Crothers' characters within the world of the play is also what is at stake for many other women in society at large. By way of example, *A Man's World* (1910), Crothers' most studied and respected play, investigates the sexual double standard of the day through her reframing of the fallen woman trope. Katie N. Johnson, in her study of American brothel drama, notes the following with regard to the fallen woman trope:

Plays about fallen women's sexuality relied upon a distinctly gendered sexual paradigm: women's sexuality was defined as either virtuous or deviant. Trapped by this binary, women could only fall from or be elevated upon a moral pedestal; there were no in-betweens. (7)

It is precisely this binary entrapment which Crothers pointedly interrogates, a society-determined entrapment which not only negatively impacts the lives of fallen women but also their upstanding, virtuous counterparts. In *A Man's World* the fallen woman character is never seen; she is long dead when the action of the play begins. However, the

fallen woman's out-of-wedlock child is the catalyst for Crothers' thematic interrogation of society's morality infused sexual double standard. The play's protagonist, Frank, is a virtuous, upstanding, single career woman raising the dead fallen woman's child, thus symbolically taking responsibility for society's shunning of the child and his mother. Furthermore, Frank is an activist on behalf of shunned women, working as a journalist researching an expose on society's shunned women, and all the while planning a charity initiative to assist them with reentering society. Frank's activism thus extends beyond her adopted child and his mother to include all shunned women. In other words, Frank is outward looking. Also notable in this early play is Crothers' articulation of a spirit of female solidarity, women helping and advocating on behalf of women. This spirit of female solidarity emboldens Frank, at the cost of her own happiness, to shun the man responsible for her adopted child's mother's fall as Crothers subverts the fallen woman trope, reframing it as a story of a shunned and fallen man.

Three years later Crothers wrote *Ourselves* (1913), another social drama after the fashion of *A Man's World*.³ *Ourselves* is also outward looking as it thematically articulates a social conscience larger than the immediate world of the play. Also similar to *A Man's World*, *Ourselves* subverts the fallen woman trope in its quest to advocate for female solidarity. In this play the virtuous, activist woman is Beatrice, a wealthy society woman intent on helping a prostitute along a path of reform towards a better life as, once again, Crothers presents an outward looking female protagonist who advocates for other women. The action of the play is initiated by Beatrice's social agenda. In Act 1 Beatrice visits a home for wayward girls, intent upon choosing one, "no matter how low she may have fallen" and making "her over into a good woman" (296). Beatrice goes on to declare that her reform intentions constitute "the biggest, most worth-while thing a woman can do" (297). Beatrice expresses these well-intentioned sentiments to Miss Carew, the woman in charge of the half-way house. Miss Carew, experienced in efforts to reform prostitutes, cautions Beatrice not to "expect miracles" (296), explaining to her that her proposed mission will be harder than she thinks. Miss Carew does not speak from a place of cynicism but from years of experience. It is important to note that Miss Carew does not blame the prostitutes for their lot in life. She blames economic conditions and the men who prey on them, both the pimps and the men who pay for their sexual services. In her savvy, enlightened state Miss Carew presents a stark contrast to Beatrice, a woman who, despite her good intentions, has largely lived a sheltered life due to her wealth and the privilege it endows. With this opening dialogue Crothers establishes a key point of dramatic conflict that will problematize Beatrice's quest – class. By the end of the play, Beatrice's "civic maternalism" (Antoniuzzi 135) will be forced to face its own class prejudice and its impact upon her idealistic desire for female solidarity.

Beatrice's choice of female-reform project is Molly. Importantly, as Patricia Schroeder notes, "Molly's status as a 'fallen woman' . . . is depicted as a result of poverty, male exploitation, family structure, and lack of opportunities for self-support, not of her promiscuous female nature or innately criminal heart" (65). In other words, Molly is not fallen by choice, a point that will prove significant in Crothers' exploration of fallenness as the play unfolds. Molly is initially resistant and suspicious of Beatrice's intentions. Beatrice tries to persuade Molly that she can help her to live a "decent" life (304). Molly reveals that she wants to marry her pimp, Leever. Beatrice counters that he "isn't fit" (304) to marry her. Molly however contends that "he's the only human bein' that really cares whether I live or die," further declaring that "nobody wants to die an old maid"

(305). What is striking is that fallen woman Molly already desires socially defined legitimacy in her personal life. Thus Crothers, in this opening act, pointedly aligns the desires of privileged society woman and prostitute. When Molly asks Beatrice, “ain’t you goin’ to marry somebody?” Beatrice responds, “yes” (305). With this initial encounter between Beatrice and Molly, Crothers begins her subversion of the fallen woman trope by decreasing the socially constructed moral distance between these two women. Eventually Beatrice persuades Molly to come and live with her for a month during which time Molly agrees to have no contact with her pimp Leever.

Act 2 takes place a month later. During the ensuing month, Beatrice has provided voice and penmanship lessons to Molly, as Molly counts the days until her month is up and she can see Leever again, whom she still hopes to marry. Beatrice and Molly again discuss marriage, both recognizing its value for women yet still disagreeing on the suitability of Leever as a husband. Molly is fiercely loyal, believing that Leever has also reformed as she has and that they can build a married life together. Once again, Crothers portrays both women as united in their views of marriage but in disagreement over Molly’s choice of husband. However, Molly has now resolved that she wants to live a “good” (319) life and not return to prostitution. Thus Crothers continues her systematic subversion of the fallen woman trope as her society-defined fallen woman, now empowered with a new sense of self and identity, is no longer in a state of fallenness. Molly’s new state of *unfallenness* is soon tested with the arrival of Leever at Beatrice’s home. He scoffs at Molly’s ideas and bullies her into giving him her allowance (from Beatrice) while refusing to marry her and threatening to put her back on the streets. Emotionally crushed and physically abused, Molly stands up for herself and her new identity and he is forced to leave. In a brief exchange of dialogue following his forced departure, Molly expresses conflicting feelings to Beatrice’s housekeeper. She truly wants to stay on the path of a good life but at the same time she feels confined within Beatrice’s walls and expresses a desire to find love and excitement. As Johnson succinctly explains, “Molly is reformed, but she still wants to have sex – not for money – but sex just the same” (154). In this moment Crothers depicts the tension within sexually desiring women when faced with society’s moral standards: “I want somebody. What am I goin’ to do? . . . Stay here and dry up in this straight-jacket of a dress-watchin’ the *good* people dancin’ and makin’ love for the rest of my life? . . . I’m lonely. Christ! I want somebody o’ my own” (319). The conflict for Molly is clear. A good, upstanding life without a husband means a life in which she must suppress her desires. In order to remain unfallen, suppress them she must. Distraught in her loneliness after the departure of Leever and her hopes for their future, Molly now falls prey to Beatrice’s married brother Bob, a serial philanderer. As he kisses her Bob leers the closing line of Act 2: “Poor little girl. You’re too damn pretty to be shut up here” (323). Crothers’ unfolding of her narrative is not subtle. In this moment upper-class Bob is pointedly aligned with Leever the pimp. Both prey on Molly’s loneliness and desire for a man. With this closing moment of Act 2 Crothers’ subversion of the fallen woman trope continues as now the fallen trope of the play is also focused on the sexual behavior of a man.

When Act 3 begins a month has gone by while Bob has continued his affair with Molly. Bob has now decided that “it’s too messy” (325) to be carrying on an affair with Molly while she lives in the home he shares with his wife and sister-in-law Beatrice. By now thoroughly enamored of Bob, Molly slavishly agrees to do whatever he wants her to do until she senses that he is trying break off the affair altogether. Distraught, Molly

threatens to kill herself. Their scene is cut short by the entrance of Bob's wife Irene, another virtuous, upstanding woman. Earlier in the play, in Act 2, Irene revealed to Beatrice her complacency with respect to her husband's affairs: "Men are more animal than women and they will live differently – so what are we going to do about it?" (310). According to Irene in this moment, men experience more sexual desire than women, a claim that she will later refute. In this same conversation Beatrice refuses to accept Irene's casual acceptance of the situation and asks her how she would react if "it were forced upon" her "as it is on so many women?" Irene replies with casual assurance that "I know Bob. He'll never do anything common or scandalous". This prompts Beatrice to challenge her further: "According to your code – so long as he doesn't offend you with an open and flagrant affair – it's all right." Irene retorts, "I say it's the way things are" (310). In Irene's estimation in Act 2, men do not fall from societal grace when they pursue their sexual desires outside the marriage state. Beatrice, however, is not willing to accept this rationale regarding the "moral laxity" of men (Murphy, *Feminism in the Marketplace* 88), claiming that women who excuse them are themselves responsible not only for their men's fall from marital grace but also for the very existence of fallen women. With her mentorship of Molly in mind Beatrice declares,

Now that I understand the horrors of what we call the social evil – I know that good women are *terribly* to blame for it all – because of their indifference towards the whole thing. It's we – we *ourselves* who are responsible for conditions – *ourselves*. If we don't care – if we don't *demand* the highest morality in our own men how are we going to get it? Or do anything for anybody else? (310-311)

The ironic foreshadowing of this Act 2 conversation is now evident in Act 3. Bob, she now discovers, has done something "common" and "scandalous." The reality of a philandering husband is now "forced upon" her and she must now confront it, in her own home. The truth of her statement – "it's the way things are" (310) – now haunts her.

Crothers' use of irony heightens Irene's moment of awareness that philandering men do indeed fall from marital grace as, in this scene, Bob begins to fall in her own estimation of him. Desperate to not recognize Bob's fallenness Irene turns on Beatrice, claiming that it is her fault for bringing Molly into the house. Beatrice then turns on Molly as her own activist ideals are shaken. Once again the spotlight is shone upon Molly in a fallen state, as at the beginning of the play. However, with the closing lines of Act 3 Molly herself steadfastly maintains the focus on the fallen man.

Are you blind as bats? Don't you live in this world? Don't you know what's goin' on? If you feel like this about it, why don't you stop it? If this is the worst thing that your men can do, why do you let 'em? Why do you stand for it and – and there wouldn't *be* any of us. (332-333)

The woman now fallen again in society's eyes turns the mirror of fallenness upon those who are responsible for it as Beatrice, like Irene earlier in the act, is now ironically confronted with a verbal image of her own previously avowed sentiments about "ourselves" being responsible. Act 3 concludes with this renewed call from a low class fallen woman to two upper class upstanding women for female solidarity in the face of male sexual desire.

The final act of *Ourselves* takes place an hour later in Bob's artist studio. In this remarkable closing scene, Molly is reclaimed by repentant Beatrice and Bob is fully recognized as a fallen man by Irene as Crothers now demonstrates female solidarity regulating and qualifying male sexual desire. Significantly, Crothers accomplishes this while simultaneously validating *female* sexual desire. A thoroughly unrepentant Bob declares to Irene, echoing her own earlier statement to Beatrice in Act 2, "do you think for a minute if you had the same amount of animal passion in your make-up that I have – you'd blame me so – for this? You don't know. Your pulses beat evenly and slowly" (336). Irene, now fully gazing at Bob in his fallenness, replies,

Don't be so mistaken. Don't count so much on the slow, even pulses of a woman – don't be so sure of the cool blood in her veins . . . I've *made* you the one man – not because no one else has ever stirred me – not because I'm not just as strong and healthy an animal as you are – but because of *you* . . . (337)

In other words, Irene does not condemn Bob for his sexual passions but for his inability to contain them within the bounds of marriage as she has done. Simultaneously she lays claim to her own sexual desire, as Crothers "explodes the nineteenth century myth that 'good women' have no sexual desire, and that any woman who does is by nature 'bad'" (Murphy, *Feminism and the Marketplace* 87). Bob's final attempt at exoneration is to blame Beatrice for bringing Molly into their home. Beatrice, however, now "accepts her role in Molly's fall" (Schroeder 67) and rejoins that the only thing she is guilty of is not defending Molly in the first place because he, her brother, is "entirely" responsible (338). Thus *Ourselves* ends with a portrait of female grace uniting the women in solidarity, gazing upon male sexuality and finding it lacking according to their standards. Importantly, their standards do allow for sexual desire. As Johnson reasons, while "Crothers argues that women should uphold high morals, she does not resort to familiar platitudes by portraying women as morally superior or sexually repressed" (153). Indeed, much of the play has dealt with women's own conflicting thoughts and emotions with regard to their own sexual desires. The sexual morality which the women advocate by play's end is a sexual desire responsibly pursued. Irresponsible Bob is now thoroughly fallen and Molly is not, as she declares, with an outward looking vision, her desire to share her new found knowledge with "every girl on earth" (338). Meaningfully, the stage directions indicate that she looks at Bob as the curtain falls on *Ourselves*.

Over the course of the ensuing twenty years, Crothers' style of playwriting evolved from her early social dramas into "sprightly comedies" (Abramson 62) by the 1930s. These "sprightly comedies" do not readily evidence the strong sense of outward looking social conscience of her early career. The characters of her 1930s plays are more inward looking, self-focused and driven by narrowly defined personal concerns. They are no longer pointedly depicted as microcosms of a larger social fabric. Not surprisingly then, they are also now peopled by self-absorbed members of the upper-middle classes. At first glance, this inward looking perspective seemingly defuses Crothers' feminist voice and its earlier pointedly resonant spirit of activism. However, as Lois Gottlieb perceptively notes, Crothers' later plays "breathe an air of exasperation about the continuation of woman's struggle for freedom" (*Rachel Crothers* 150). The packaging of her views may have changed, but her continuing concerns about the lives of women have not. It is interesting to note, then, that *When Ladies Meet* (1933), one of these inward-looking "sprightly

comedies”, is remarkably similar to *Ourselves* in terms of thematic imperative and dramaturgical strategy. Thematically, this later play also argues for female solidarity in order to hold accountable male sexual desire. Dramaturgically, this later play also supports its thematic imperative by subverting a fallen woman trope and reframing it as a fallen man trope.

Crothers’s interrogation of the fallen woman trope in this instance first requires that she explore the societal boundaries of the fallen woman archetype in the 1930s by questioning the implications of its ongoing presence. The fallen woman character of *When Ladies Meet* is not a prostitute. She is a middle class career woman, a novelist named Mary. Crothers’ equating of Mary with this archetype is complex and speaks to the sexual ambiguity represented by the respectable, unmarried career woman in the 1930s. Heightening this sense of ambiguity is Mary’s denial of her fallen woman status, a denial that provides the dramatic conflict of the play. When the narrative of the play begins Mary has for some time been involved in an affair with her married publisher, Rogers. She has just finished a manuscript for a new novel in which two women – the lover and the wife of the same man – meet and talk calmly and rationally about which of them shares the strongest love with the man. At the conclusion of their meeting the woman who loses bows out quietly. In essence, the lover and the wife ultimately decide the fate of the philandering husband’s sexual pursuits, thematically echoing Beatrice’s call for responsibly pursued male sexual desire in *Ourselves*. Also similar to *Ourselves* is Crothers’ determination to validate female sexual desire in the process.

The scenario of her novel not so subtly mirrors Mary’s own developing situation, though she resists noticing this connection. Various people within the play, including Rogers himself, debate the logic of the novel’s premise with Mary. She steadfastly defends it as utterly logical and realistic. In particular she defends the character of the non-wife woman, claiming she is “good” (13) and “decent” (11). Mary’s insistence on romanticizing and sanitizing the motives of the philandering husband and his new love in the novel quickly intertwines with her own defense of her affair with Rogers. As the plot of *When Ladies Meet* unfolds, Mary vigorously defends her own actions, claiming she is neither “common” (14) nor a mistress. At the core of Mary’s denial and romantic packaging of her love affair is a desire not only to exonerate herself but also Rogers. She refuses to entertain the idea that Rogers’ pursuit of his sexual desire outside of marriage is anything but pure and justified. Like the married man in the novel, he too claims that he now loves only Mary. By the end of Act 1, the play’s climactic moment is clearly foreshadowed as Mary negotiates the same terrain of logic, responsibility and sexual desire as her novel’s heroine.

Mary’s insistence that she is not a mistress speaks to the disdain with which Mary’s society regards such women, such fallen women. Her denial in turn attempts to awkwardly claim a new identity for herself as a woman having an affair with a married man, an identity devoid of society’s condemnation. In this respect, Mary is a prime example of a 1930s Crothers heroine, one who is self-focused and inward looking. Mary is so concerned about her own sexual status in her own heart and mind that she fails to see the contradiction when she claims that she is not like other women having affairs with married men. By every known societal definition she is a mistress, a fallen woman. This intensely personal crisis of identity by unmarried sexually desiring Mary is explained by her friend Bridget:

I tell you this is an awfully *hard age* for a *good* woman to live in. I mean one who wants to have any *fun*. If you've still got the instincts for the right and wrong that were pounded into you when you were a girl – what are you going to *do* with 'em? . . . And they just get you mixed up – and hold you back – so you're neither one thing nor the other. Neither happy – and bad – nor good and *contented*. You're just *discontentedly decent* – and it doesn't get you *anywhere*. (23-24)

Through Bridget's words Crothers articulates the lingering presence of fallen womanness in societal morality. Unfallen, good women do not have fun. Bad women have fun. Bridget also importantly acknowledges that "fun" (23) is a key ingredient for contentment. Thus she validates the sexual desires of women while acknowledging society's continued expectations that good women not pursue them. Taking this logic to its conclusion, society does not care if women are content or not as long as they are good. Mary is desperate to understand herself as 'good' while also seeking to fulfill her desires and to live contentedly. The question explored by Crothers is, can she accomplish both?

Ironically, Mary is dependent upon both Rogers and his wife for validation as a good, upstanding woman with honorably pursued desires. As the plot unfolds, Mary experiences moments of doubt, feeling badly about Rogers' wife: "I keep putting myself in her place" (39). She suggests that she and Rogers simply be friends, a suggestion Rogers scoffs at: "You're talking hot air and you know it" (40). Mary then blames herself, taking full responsibility for their mutual sexual desires: "It's all my fault anyway. I had no business to let it get as far as this" (41). Rogers then makes her feel guilty for leading him on: "you don't love me" (43). Finally Mary declares, "I'd give my soul if I were standing beside you like this – forever – never to be alone again. It's the aloneness that frightens me" (43). Throughout this scene Mary expresses sentiments remarkably reminiscent of those expressed by Molly in *Ourselves*. Both Molly and Mary are lonely and desire to not be alone. The sexual desire of Molly and Mary and their longing for companionship are not mutually exclusive but complexly intertwined. Molly fell in love and desire with Bob as Mary has fallen in love and desire with Rogers. However, to act upon their desires and attendant feelings of love in an unmarried state is to cast themselves into fallenness. By thus aligning characteristics of prostitute Molly with career-woman Mary twenty years later Crothers challenges the definition of fallen woman and exposes the continuing sexual double standard of society for a broader group of women than previously recognized.

Through various plot twists Mary and Rogers' wife Claire meet in Act 2 at Bridget's country home, though they do not at first know the true identity of each other with regard to Rogers. The women are quickly drawn to each other in a friendly fashion. Learning that Claire is an admirer of her novels, Mary asks Claire for her opinion of the disputed premise of her latest novel. Mary describes the novel's heroine as a "lover" not a "mistress," to which Claire responds "I'm afraid that's what the wife will call her" (110). Claire then reveals that her husband has had affairs. Mary quickly rejoins, "but no man could stop loving *you*. *You* aren't her kind of woman." Claire's telling reply is "We're *all* her kind of woman" (112). Specifically, Claire means that all women believe they are the love of a man's life if he says so. Mary's ironic blindness in this moment is striking. While Claire expresses, with remarkable grace, a sympathetic attitude towards her rivals in this regard, even claiming an affinity with them, Mary insists on othering a certain 'kind' of

woman, a kind of woman which she herself is but refuses to acknowledge. With Claire's words, Crothers' subverting of the fallen woman trope intensifies.

Claire further explains her answers by sharing more of her own experience. The similarities between Claire and Irene of *Ourselves* are immediately apparent. Speaking of her husband's serial philandering Claire recalls,

When the first one happened it nearly killed me. I thought the end of everything had come. But when the second one bobbed up it took the sting out of the first because I knew then one didn't mean any more than the other to him. I can always tell when an affair is waning. He turns back to the old comfortable institution of marriage . . . (113)

Once again Crothers presents a virtuous wife who is fully cognizant of her husband's infidelity and determined to be his apologist even at the cost of losing herself. Claire then continues to challenge the veracity of Mary's scenario with regard to the women meeting. Mary asks her what she would do if she were the wife in the novel. Claire declares, "I'd loathe her with a deadly hate that would shrivel her up. I'd call her a vile brazen slut I suppose – and tell her to get out. But I don't believe she'd come" (114). With Claire's declaration about "a vile brazen slut" Mary's denial is thrown into further confusion. She tries to maintain her romantic idealism and its attendant denial: "Yes but don't you think love makes everything easy?" Again challenging her idealism Claire responds, "No! I think it makes everything hard." Finally shattering Mary's delusions Claire tells Mary that the "two women *couldn't* talk to each other" (115).

The ironic overlay of this encounter heightens Mary's denial of her fallen woman status. Through her encounter with virtuous Claire, a confessed enabler of a philandering husband, she is forced to recognize the shallowness of the idyllic meeting between women that she envisioned both in fiction and in fact. Immediately following Claire's remark dismissing the idea of the women meeting, Mary inadvertently reveals the name of her publisher. As Claire puts the pieces together of Mary's true identity, Rogers enters the scene, compelling Mary to realize Claire's true identity as well. The following morning, Mary and Claire finally meet briefly alone, now fully cognizant of each other's identity. Their discussion of their mutual predicament with respect to the same man does not follow the course that Mary envisioned. Neither of them ends up with the man, both rejecting him and on remarkably similar grounds. Mary says to Claire, "it *was* right - to *me* – till I saw you . . . I didn't know what I was doing – to *you*" (132). Claire, in her turn, later says to Rogers "I've always been glad to have you back before – and thankful it was over – always thinking of *you* – never of *her* – but now – I've *seen* her . . ." (133). In essence, the meeting of the women accomplishes a mutual understanding of the complexities of female sexual desire and the need for it to be pursued responsibly with respect to other women. While simultaneously recognizing each other as a measure of themselves they separately decide to reject male sexual desire which is devoid of responsibility.

Thus Rogers falls from female-determined grace. Like Bob in *Ourselves*, Rogers is the fallen person at the play's conclusion, fallen according to the sexual mores of women. As in *Ourselves*, the women, not society at large, have adjudged a man's sexual desire to be irresponsible. Yvonne Shafer correctly states that *When Ladies Meets* does not constitute "a plea for more sexual freedom for women, but for an end to adultery and

seduction on the part of men” (30). However, while Crothers does not offer a “plea” for sexual freedom for women she does validate the difficulty experienced by unmarried sexually desiring women trying to be responsible to themselves and other women. In this way, Crothers again refuses simplistic moralizing about female sexuality. Mary, due to her new enlightenment, is no longer a fallen woman. However, Mary, like Molly, is still a sexually desiring woman in an unmarried state with the specter of future fallenness, according to societal standards, ever present. Like Molly, Mary has learned that her sexual desire must be pursued in a fashion that is responsible, not to society’s dictates, but to other women. However, this realization strands her in a state of discontent. As for Claire, like Irene she finds herself in a broken marriage by choice as she “rejects her lonely role as keeper of marital contract and caretaker of Roger’s ego” (Gottlieb, *Rachel Crothers* 133). Both wives assert their right to refuse to continue in a marriage in which only one partner practices fidelity. They too are left stranded in states of discontent.

In her analysis of *Ourselves* Barbara Antoniazzi refers to Molly as a “modern desiring subject” (145), a description that is also apt for Mary. In Crothers’ *Ourselves* and *When Ladies Meet* unmarried, sexually desiring women are positioned as judging subjects, not judged objects. Her deliberate coding of Molly and Mary as fallen women calls attention to their usual objectification in fallen women tropes. In Crothers’ subversive reframings, fallenness is viewed, judged and redefined by the fallen women themselves in partnership with women usually portrayed in opposition to them – the virtuous, upstanding, cheated on wives and loved ones. This subversive female solidarity reassigns fallenness to philandering husbands. In *Ourselves* and *When Ladies Meet* Crothers redefines fallenness as a state in which a person – either a man or a woman – fails to pursue sexual desire in a responsible fashion. Crothers also redefines the arbiter(s) of fallenness as women, not society. Her remarkably similar thematic arguments in *Ourselves* (1913) and *When Ladies Meet* (1933) paint a picture of a playwright who is still, twenty years later, bothered by society’s continual objectification of women within public discourse about sexual morality. In both plays she positions her female characters as desiring subjects of their own narratives of sexual desire, narratives that command the thematic, female point of view of each play.

¹ Much of the existing scholarship on Rachel Crothers makes note of the changing tone of her “feminist” voice throughout the course of her career. See Abramson, Gottlieb, Koritz, Murphy and Shafer.

² See Antoniazzi, Gottlieb, Johnson, and Schroeder in particular regarding Crothers’ social problem plays.

³ *Ourselves* has quite recently attracted scholarly attention in two studies of prostitution and theatre. See Antoniazzi (2014) and Johnson (2006). Both studies locate *Ourselves* within a larger theatrical and social context and examine the extent to which Crothers’ play challenged both social and dramaturgical norms.

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